

1998 MAASA Presidential Address

Shopping: The Moral Ecology of Consumption

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This essay is a meditation on a billboard. The billboard in question said quite simply and quite elegantly that “There’s only one more shopping day until tomorrow.” In this essay, I propose to think about this stunning sentence, and about shopping in American culture, and to probe a few questions: What’s a shopping day? What is shopping? What does it mean? What is shopping for? Why do we shop? How do we learn to shop? What do we think we’re doing? What *are* we doing? What are the structures of shopping? What are the meanings of shopping? Who shapes shopping, and how?¹

These questions are part of a larger inquiry called, tentatively, *Habits of My Heart: The Moral Ecology of Everyday Life*. It’s an attempt to understand why I act the way I do, why I act like an American. Like this essay, the other chapters of the book use everyday events to explore the patterns of American culture. There’s one chapter on an alarm clock, and another on a cup of coffee; one on driving a car and another on domestic architecture; one on going to school and another on going to work; one on going to church, and another on watching TV. In a way, it’s my modest attempt to keep American Studies from becoming “merely academic.”²

Shopping is, etymologically, the process of going to shops to purchase goods and services. A shop is, according to Webster, a small retail store; the word comes from a root that denoted the booths or stalls of the marketplace. The word became

a verb in the late eighteenth century, and a way of life in the late twentieth century. Americans learn to shop almost from birth. The average American child makes a first trip to a mall at two months of age. By two years, this average kid can name a product. By four, they can evaluate a product, and at six they've internalized the idea that "better brands cost more." At the relatively late age of eleven, they begin to understand that some claims are misleading. By adulthood, the average American of the nineties consumes twice as many goods and services as the average American of 1950, and ten times as much as a counterpart from 1928.³

Shopping is sometimes seen as what you do to get ready for something else (for meals, for parties, for work, for a vacation, etc.), but for many Americans, shopping is an end in itself. Some Americans even advertise their avocation on bumperstickers or T-shirts that say "Born to Shop" or "Shut Up and Shop" or "I'd Rather Be Shopping," or "When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Go Shopping," or "Shop 'til You Drop." Shopping is one of the primary recreational activities of Americans. Americans go to shopping centers more religiously than they attend religious services—more than once a week—and we spend several hours a week at various kinds of shopping. Since mid-century, only television watching has increased faster than shopping among leisure activities.⁴

This essay approaches shopping by thinking first about *things*, and then briefly at how advertising and shopping malls give *meaning* to things. Finally, it considers how we shoppers make sense of our materialism—the materialism that manifests itself in advertising and shopping malls.

The Meaning of Things

First and foremost, shopping is an *imaginative* activity. We usually think of shopping as a physical activity, as a discrete act—we think we *go* shopping—but shopping is *going on* almost all the time. Even before I set foot in a store, my shopping trip is in process in my head. I don't need to go to Macy's or Dayton's, Target or K-Mart; they come to me in the millions of ads that I encounter in my home—on TV, in the newspaper and magazines, in direct mail, and now, on the Internet. In many ways, these ads create an imaginative itinerary for my shopping trip. This trip involves an intertextual collage of ideas and images, of things and their spiritual and social penumbras, many of which come to us from the incessant imaging of advertising. We travel from the real world of our experience into fantasy worlds conjured up to compensate for the poverty of our experience. In this Wonderland, we see objects transformed and transvalued by acts of *dissociation* and *association*. Dissociated from their social and material contexts, objects are then associated with images and emotions that make them more desirable. As the Colorado store in the Mall of America says, "It's not only a state. It's a state of mind."⁵

In contemporary societies, shopping is an activity designed to dispense with the productions of modern manufacturing. When most things were literally manu-factured (or made by hand) for people who had ordered them ready-made,

society didn't need shoppers. But once mass production began, the production of shoppers was necessary for the continuation of production. If people didn't shop, businesses would fail. Indeed, the shopper is an essential cog in the wheels of modern life, which revolves around the axle of commerce. We normally think that advertising is made to sell us things, but it's also made to make us into a particular thing—a consumer.⁶

Stuart Ewen's book *Captains of Consciousness* shows how corporate advertisers reshaped the American consciousness from virtues of frugality and deferred gratification to a new ethic of mass consumption. Within a capitalist system of supply and demand, the advertisers would supply the demand for products. Advertisers know that, while people go to supermarkets and shopping malls to purchase products, real shopping is more about people than about merchandise, and it takes place mostly in the mind.⁷

Advertising works in our minds (or *on* our minds) by identifying artifacts with basic human needs. In an article called "Advertising's Fifteen Basic Appeals," author Jib Fowles notes that advertising appeals to our physiological needs for food and drink and sleep and shelter. But it also appeals to social needs like sex, affiliation, nurture, and guidance; and individual needs like achievement, domination, prominence, autonomy, escape, safety, beauty, and the satisfaction of curiosity. The goal of advertising is to match this list of real human needs with the range of possible objects. Emphasizing the imputed characteristics of objects as much as their objective properties, ads literally objectify our needs. Need confidence? Buy Secret. Need a closer connection with nature? Try the Nature Company. Need community? Join what Daniel Boorstin calls a "consumption community," the group of people who prefer Pepsi or Hondas or the Gap. Need girls? Buy Brut. Need a man? Try a Toyota instead. Want to *be a man*? Smoke Marlboro. Need escape? "Escape to our own little island."⁸

In responding to these ads, we sometimes buy particular commodities, but we also buy the general proposition that human needs can be satisfied by the purchase of objects, an idea that Michael Schudson calls "capitalist realism." In *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion*, Schudson shows persuasively that individual advertisements may not affect us, but that all of them together—1,500 ads a day for a lifetime—serve as propaganda for a system of satisfying needs and desires by spending money. They also serve to assure us that we're not good enough the way we are.⁹

Advertisers know that we buy artifacts, but we really want meaning. In any culture—even a pre-commercial culture—commodities are like words, a language that can be learned and spoken. The things that we buy are not just objects, but whole networks of social and semantic meanings. In *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood suggest that "the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense. Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty." We use the products



Figure 1: Style: you are what you fantasize (Photograph by Kahla Foster)

of the marketplace to produce what Stuart Ewen calls a “commodity self.” We become “somebody.”¹⁰

Commodities help us with what sociologist Erving Goffman calls “the presentation of self in everyday life.” In this dramaturgical model, our possessions help us with “impression management,” letting us define who we are by defining how we will be seen. In the process, we create what sociologist Charles Horton Cooley called “the looking-glass self,” the self as we imagine it seen by others. In many ways, we become who other people think we are, and we are most becoming, therefore, when we present ourselves as we want to be seen. Image value is then as important as use value, because it *is* use value. As Descartes might have said today, “I look cool, therefore I am.” Or as contemporary philosopher and sometime tennis star Andre Agassi reminds us, “Image is everything.”¹¹

Commodities, therefore, become a communication system, a language all their own. By seeing what we own, most people in this culture can read us like a book. Babies are born naked, but cultures soon clothe them in patterns of meaning. By looking at me today, for example, you can make many judgments—judgments that are essentially cultural, but are taken personally. You know—or at least you think you know—that I am not a deviant. My hair is not spiked, my clothes are not torn, I’m not wearing a T-shirt or tennis shoes for a more formal occasion. In short, you know that I know the rules, the conventions of American academic dress, and that I am willing to abide by them. You decide to overlook the tie, which is gaudy, but not absolutely tasteless, and, in any case, may be permitted to a

professor of American Studies, which is an eccentric academic endeavor anyway.¹²

Given that we can make meanings with things, what meanings do we routinely choose? In a chapter called “The Evocative Power of Things” in his book *Culture and Consumption*, Grant McCracken suggests that we often use consumer goods to recover the “displaced meanings” of our culture. We shop, he suggests, for what we are missing in our lives—good work, interpersonal intimacy, friendship, virtue, a sense of purpose, excitement. When we buy things, we look often for what a Geo Tracker ad calls “the complete and total opposite of what you’re doing now.” Or as a recent ad for the Isuzu Rodeo tells the reader forthrightly, “You would not be very human if you did not mostly prefer to be not-here, not-now.”¹³

Think about this—what does this horrifying statement say about the character of our civilization and institutions? Absent the meanings that genuinely satisfy human beings, a culture displaces those meanings to the past or the future, or to literally fantastic places or peoples where they can exist in the imagination without interfering with the “necessities” of the so-called “real world.” Using what Jon Goss calls “a vast array of clichéd signs of real and fictitious elsewheres”—the advertiser makes the product make meanings for us. Often these imaginative associations are more important than the products themselves. Attaching these displaced meanings to the things that are placed on shelves, advertisers promise to fulfill us by filling our shopping bags.¹⁴

Artifacts allow us to buy the symbolism of satisfaction without actually changing our social patterns. By locating us imaginatively in the not-here and not-now, the commodity becomes an “objective correlative” of a whole way of life that would be better than ours. We can buy Country Time Old-Fashioned Lemonade for the displaced meanings of family and community in the past, without seriously dealing with the implicit criticism our ancestors might aim at us (in part, for creating a lemonade drink with no lemon in it). We can shop at the Nature Store without thinking about our own environmental impact. We can be socially conscious at the Rainforest Café or the Body Shop, without ever affecting the *institutions* that structure our social irresponsibility.¹⁵

Using both illusion and allusion, advertisers decontextualize the object from the real world and recontextualize it in the world of our imaginations. Car ads, for example, never show cars in our garage, with its piles of junk and garbage. They almost never show cars on suburban streets, or people driving to the store for milk. They don’t show the tedium of interstate highways, or kids fighting in the backseat. They don’t show car crashes or road kill or junk yards. They don’t show commuters jammed in traffic, or the refined etiquette of commuting, with its delicate finger gestures. They don’t show the ozone hole. Instead they show cars on mountaintops, in forests and fields, on country roads or “off-road,” in all the places that haven’t yet been ruined or congested by cars, in all the places where we can still be, as another Tracker ad suggests, “at two with nature.”¹⁶

Despite such decontextualization, advertisements still present us with *models* of life that muddle the lives that we live. Both the “models” and the “life” are problematic. The human models portrayed in ads embody a physical stature unattainable by most Americans, and even their representations are airbrushed to be “truer than the truth.” What does it mean when none of the models for our lives look like us?¹⁷

Acting in symbolic social and spatial settings, these human models also model “the good life,” presenting us with images of life as it ought to be. Television programs and advertising (which is the real programming of TV) routinely show us that the good life is a function of the goods we buy. They teach us to keep up appearances and to keep up with the Joneses. But they don’t say much about keeping our faith—to families, to friends, to communities, to God, if we believe there is a God. Sometimes, we end up looking *good*, living the *good* life, and wondering what’s *really* good about it.¹⁸

Advertising often suggests that, like magic (a word often explicitly used in advertising—and an odd choice for a people who pride themselves on not being superstitious), the purchase of a commodity will give us control over the natural and social worlds, including our bodies. By featuring the object and its preternatural powers, advertising, therefore, helps us forget the real power structures that produced the commodity. We look at store displays advertising the “Timbuktu Station” or “Global Connections,” but we forget the genuinely global connections of the mall. Somewhere (often in the Third World) someone (often underpaid workers) has been organized to manufacture this thing for us. Ads almost never show the power of corporations over governments (especially other governments), and over their workers. They hide structural injustice and inequality in a cornucopia of commodities. This is why, in part, the Kathie Lee Gifford sweatshop stories of 1996 were so surprising. As in school, we are taught very well by what we are not taught. Advertising teaches us what William Cronon calls “consumer forgetfulness.”¹⁹

This consumer forgetfulness helps us to focus on the price of things, without worrying about the costs. Americans are a people, says environmentalist David Orr, who know the price of everything, but the cost of nothing. Most commodities cost a lot—not just economically, but socially and ecologically—but we don’t see these costs because advertising and retailing a(d)vert our attention from the cost to the image and the price. In the same way, we seldom consider the “opportunity costs” of our purchases when we are shopping. Economists use the concept of “opportunity costs” to describe the things we could have purchased but didn’t. It’s what you give up to get what you get. The opportunity cost of a luxury car might be a vacation, for example, or a year of college education, or contributions to church or charity, or a portion of a government nutrition program. Or the opportunity cost of a commodity might be the time spent to make the money to spend on the thing we buy.²⁰

Adbusters magazine, which is published by the Media Foundation of Canada, publishes advertising satires that sometimes expose the invisible com-

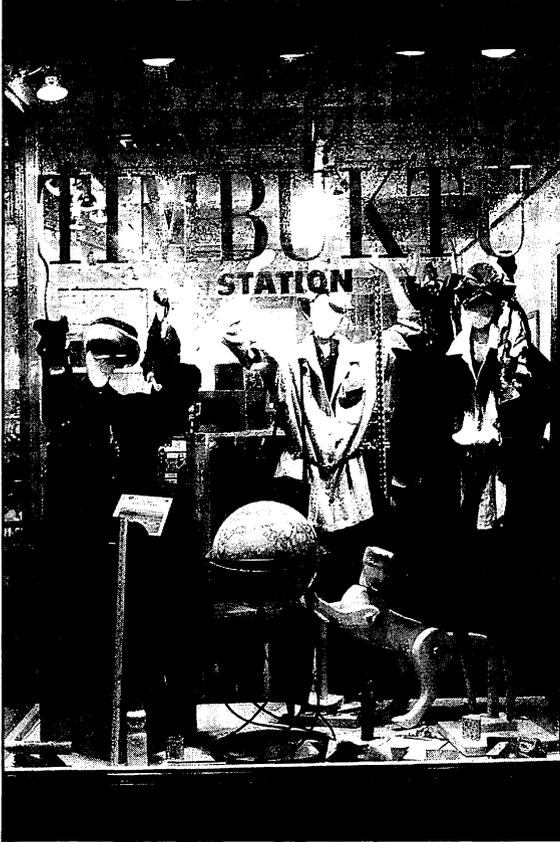


Figure 2: Global connections

plexities that ads often cover up. One parody reminds us that Gap Kids sometimes depend on the child labor of other kids with the slogan “What they give is what you get.” A Nike ad has been altered to say “Nike—Just Pay Me.” A billboard advertising “a scorcher” of a car has been altered to remind people about global warming. Another ad asks readers to “Spot the serial killer,” and claims that “The car is killing us. Slowly, inexorably. Our love affair with the automobile is a poisonous liaison with a beguiling assassin. An assassin that accelerates the depletion of the ozone layer, changes the climate, and slowly strangles the planet.” *Adbusters’* parodies help contemporary consumers to re-contextualize the de-contextualized images they receive.²¹

While shopping and consumption are both *socially* constructed, they are artfully constructed so that they don’t *feel* that way. In her book *Consuming Passions*, Judith Williamson contends that consumption occurs in “the context of a society in which the majority of people have no control whatsoever over their

productive lives: no security, little choice in work if they have work at all, and no means of public expression.” Consumption, therefore, is seen as freedom–freedom of choice in a person’s free time. Even though we pay for it, it is our compensation for what we might call “slave time.” In this way, it is part of what historians have sometimes called the Great Compromise, in which workers at the turn of the century said, in effect, “We are willing to do stupid unfulfilling work if you pay us enough that we can compensate for it in our private lives.” The result was, as Williamson suggests, that “the conscious, chosen meaning in people’s lives comes more from what they consume than from what they produce. Clothes, interiors, furniture, records, knickknacks, all the things that we buy involve decisions and the exercise of our own judgment, choice, ‘taste.’ . . . Consuming seems to offer a certain scope for creativity, rather like a toy where all the parts are pre-chosen but the combinations are multiple.” Like a child with a transformer, we think we manipulate the toy, when, in fact, it transforms us.²²

Still, while advertisers may be captains of consciousness, they can’t prevent insubordination in the ranks. Even though advertisers carefully construct ads for their preferred readings, real readers can (and do) interpret them differently. Although people often internalize the values and desires of ads, especially in the aggregate, they sometimes read *into* ads, and make the meanings their own. John Fiske especially emphasizes that people make popular culture out of the images and artifacts that advertisers give them. They make do by making meanings for themselves. While advertisers *are* powerful, it doesn’t necessarily follow that people are *powerless*.²³

Shopping Malls

Shopping malls are one place where the fantasy of ads becomes reality—or at least another fantasy. Malls are the paradise of merchandise. The United States has more shopping malls than high schools. In the last forty years, shopping center space has increased by a factor of twelve. By 1990, there were over 35,000 shopping malls in the United States, with 4.2 *billion* square feet of gross leasable space. That’s 151 square miles. Currently the United States has 42,000 shopping centers (most of which are strip centers), which generate almost a trillion dollars in annual sales. Not counting cars and gasoline, that’s about half of the nation’s retail activity. The International Council of Shopping Centers reported that in 1996 America’s shopping centers served 185 million Americans a month, employing eleven million workers. In fact, malls employ almost ten percent of the nonfarm workforce in the country. Malls attract 183 million shoppers a month, generating \$38 billion in state sales taxes on annual retail sales of \$914 billion.²⁴

Malls have also become tourist attractions; according to the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, 88 percent of travelers from abroad say that shopping is their Number One activity when they come to the States. By 1990, Potomac Mills Shopping Mall was the number one visitor destination in Virginia, a state which has a variety of other interesting places. Twelve million people visited the

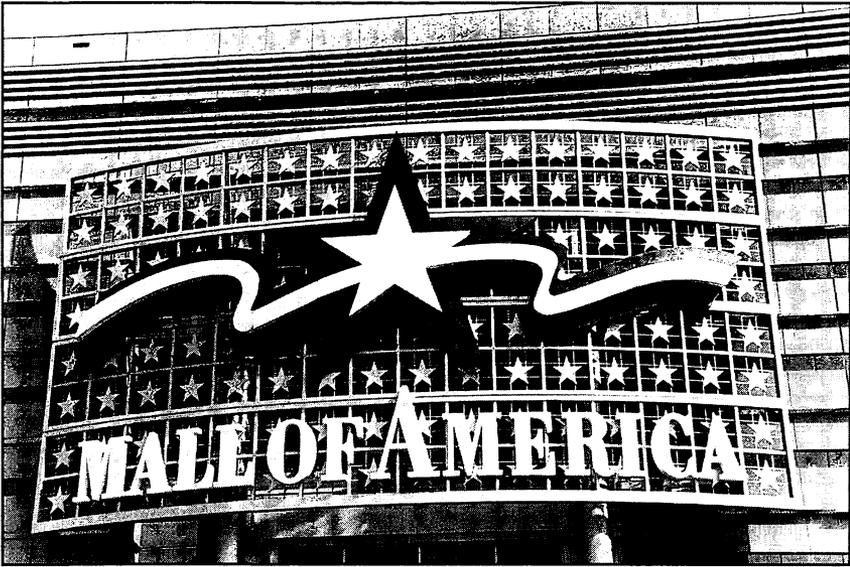


Figure 3: The paradise of merchandise (*Photograph by Kahla Foster*)

mall, but that number is mere peanuts compared to Minnesota's Mall of America, which opened in 1992, and features the Peanuts cartoon characters in its Camp Snoopy theme park. Initial estimates claimed that the mall would attract as many visitors as Disney World, and it has, averaging forty million visitors a year. I had the good fortune to be there on the second busiest day, when over a quarter of a million people came to shop. Mall of America is such a tourist attraction that it even has its own stores in the mall. There you can buy souvenirs of your trip to buy commodities.²⁵

Like the department store, which it succeeded, the shopping mall is one of the most intentional institutions in human history. In 1960, the influential Victor Gruen published *Shopping Towns U.S.A.: The Planning of Shopping Centers*, which became a virtual bible for mall developers. Using Gruen's example and a variety of new research tools, these developers try to effect what is known in the trade as "the Gruen transfer," a process by which a "destination buyer" like me is transformed into an impulse shopper, a person who browses through the mall instead of striding to a specific store.²⁶

Mall developers use econometric and locational models to decide on the placement of the mall; they use demographic and market research to determine the character of the mall; they use environmental and architectural analysis to plan the form of the mall; and they even use psychographics to decide on the "tenant mix" and marketing strategies of the mall. Developers, for example, use tools like the Stanford Research Institute's Values and Lifestyles program to choose what department stores should anchor a mall, and which specialty shops can comple-

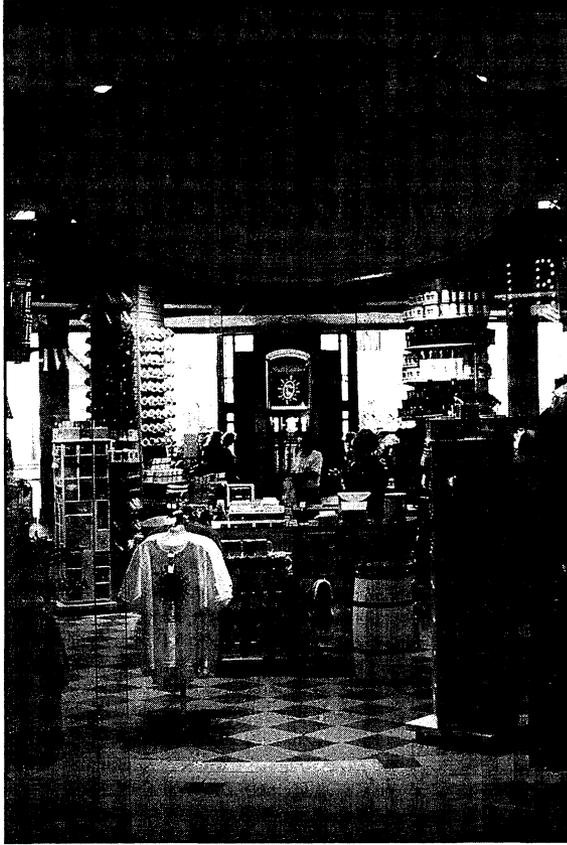


Figure 4: Souvenirs of a trip to buy commodities

ment the anchors. They know that Brooks Brothers and Ann Taylor shops work well in areas populated by *achievers* and *emulators* (generally young, hard-working, status-conscious yuppie types), while *sustainers* and *belongers* (poorer middle-class conservatives and conformists) prefer the value of K-Mart or J.C. Penney. Mindful that shopping is mainly in the mind, psychographics is a way of “minding the store” so that it makes the most money.²⁷

Except for places like the Mall of America, the shopping center itself doesn’t sell *anything* in its selling machine. Shopping center income comes from rents of retailers—both a fixed rent for a certain square footage, and then usually an additional “overage,” or percentage of sales. So the shopping center has a vested interest in getting people into the center, where retailers and restaurants can separate them from their money. In *Shopping Malls: Planning and Design*, Barry Maitland says simply that a mall is essentially “a channel for the manipulation of pedestrian flows.” Trade publications speak of “magnet” or “anchor” stores, the

ones that pull people into the mall, and planners arrange the magnets for maximum “pull” and “flow.” Traditionally, anchors have been department stores or supermarkets, but recently restaurants, movie theatres, and amusement parks have also become important flow generators. Similarly, planners arrange stores to maximize the benefits of “adjacent attraction.”²⁸

The mall generates traffic in three interrelated ways: it uses its architecture, its tenant mix, and its promotions to pull people in. At the level of architecture, developers and designers know how to “theme” the mall to make it a place that encourages shopping, often by locating it in the not-here and not-now. Malls—and early malls especially—evoked what Jon Goss calls “a modernistic nostalgia for authentic community.” Like Main Street in Disneyland, these malls used idealizations and architectural references to small towns and villages to return Americans to the simpler life of yesteryear. By making it *look* like the shopper was entering a pre-modern past, they could make it *feel* like modern shopping wasn’t happening. More recent “festival marketplaces”—including Boston’s Faneuil Hall, Quincy Street Market, etc.—actually occupy the past, converting its pastness to a nostalgic commodity that increases the sales of contemporary commodities.²⁹

In the same way, malls continually evoke nature to “decontaminate” or “naturalize” the transactions at the cash register. A postcard from the Mall of America, for example, claims that “Nature’s beauty flows through Mall of America year-round. Fountains, streams, live plants and trees flourish in the department store courtyards, in Knott’s Camp Snoopy, along every avenue, and at Golf Mountain, an 18-hole miniature golf course. Sunshine through the many



Figure 5: Market research: giving customers what they buy (*Photograph by Kahla Foster*)

skylights adds an outdoors radiance to this natural, indoors setting.” Ask yourself, just what does the word “natural” mean in that last sentence? What, in fact, is natural about any indoors setting? In fact, in this situation, nature is the face that culture (and especially the culture of commerce) wears at the mall, as these “softscapes”—to use the industry term—make us feel like we’re in a natural place where we’re not being manipulated—which, of course, is exactly where we’re not.³⁰

Even after the malls are built, developers and designers continue their market research. In Minneapolis, for example, the owners of Southdale—the world’s first indoor shopping center—know that their average shopper is a 40.3-year-old female living in a household of 1.7 people. With an annual income over \$33,000, she buys six pairs of shoes a year, and is willing to spend more than \$125 for a coat. And they shape the mall’s decor and promotions—including the billboard reminding us of the number of shopping days before tomorrow—to appeal to her.³¹

Shopping centers often present us with “myths of elsewhere” by creating exotic-looking locations that make us feel like we’re on vacation, where we’re not so critical about our spending, instead of making a commercial transaction. J.C. Nichols’ Country Club Plaza, created in Kansas City in 1922, was among the first to commodify the exotic, with a Mediterranean architecture that exoticized the Midwest. Shopping centers almost never look like our neighborhoods or cities, in much the same way that TV shows seldom show us people watching TV. Because we often feel trapped in the place we are, the “otherwhere-itis” of the mall often gives us a sense of freedom and fun. Too, we know that walking the “foreign” streets of the mall is safer than walking the actual streets of our cities, due to the constant surveillance of mall security.³²

Shopping centers often give us the glitz and neon that associate them with the entertainment industry. One of the “streets” of the Mall of America is “East Broadway,” with lighting and signs that suggests the nightlife of the big city. Newer malls also *incorporate* the entertainment industry, as Mall of America does with its 14-screen movie theater, its Planet Hollywood, its comedy club, and a variety of musical nightclubs. Increasingly, to say “Let’s go to the mall” is not necessarily to say “Let’s go shopping.”³³

Modern shopping centers like the West Edmonton Mall and the Mall of America also include attractions that appeal to America’s “fun morality.” A concept first identified by sociologist Martha Wolfenstein, “fun morality” is the nagging sense that we ought to be having fun in the socially approved ways that, say, people in beer commercials do. Inverting the Puritan ethic, we are now scrupulous not just about our work, but also about our leisure. West Edmonton Mall includes a water park, while Mall of America includes a seven-acre amusement park, a Lego Imagination Center, a two-story miniature golf course, and a walk-through aquarium called “Underwater World.” (“Ocean under construction,” the signs said modestly as the attraction was being built.) The Mall of America’s slogan is “There’s a place for fun in your life,” and they figure, I



Figure 6: Broadway on main street (Photograph by Kahla Foster)

guess, that the more we think of shopping as fun, the less we think about what we *really* need.³⁴

Oddly, since they are all surrounded by acres of parking lots (the Mall of America can park 13,000 cars, all within 300 feet of an entrance), malls free Americans momentarily from the constraints of the car culture and offer them a purely pedestrian environment. They are the twentieth century equivalent of the promenade, the public places where people walked to see and be seen. Like Disneyland and Disney World, which serve as models for the newer malls, the developers consciously develop spaces that enhance the satisfactions of being in public with other people. Ironically, however, malls are *not* (yet) public space, functioning instead as part of the *de*-publican agenda of American twentieth-century culture.³⁵

All of these strategies are ways of making the mall seem noncommercial, an excellent commercial strategy, because it accomplishes the primary goal of keeping people in the mall longer, and the longer they stay, the more they shop. In the strip malls of 1960, the average visit lasted twenty minutes. In modern malls, the average is over an hour. At Mall of America, it's closer to three hours.³⁶

The Meanings of Materialism

For many Americans, shopping is the primary method for materializing American materialism. Whether or not we think our visits to the shopping mall are fully choreographed, we usually come home with things, the particular

evidence of our general interest in materialism. In a book entitled *God and Mammon in America*, sociologist Robert Wuthnow tried to find out how it was possible for one of the most religious nations on earth to be one of the most materialistic nations *ever*. At the same time, practically speaking, he was trying to explain the faith expressed in a version of the 23rd Psalm found on T-shirts sold at the Mall of America: “YEA, though I shop the Mall of America, with great anticipation and no idea of what lies beyond the next corner, I shall fear no EVIL, because with over 4,000,000 square feet to cover and serious plastic in my pocket, there isn’t enough time to understand FEAR anyway.”³⁷

Wuthnow found that, although religion does exert considerable influence on American behavior, it doesn’t much affect shopping. And this is not surprising. Compare the *weekly* church sermon to the *daily* preaching of the Church of the Holy Shopper. When people buy a new car or a new dress, how often is the religious doctrine of stewardship on their minds? (Of course, it is precisely the job of advertising and salesmanship to keep such considerations out of their minds.) Instead of changing our materialistic behavior, Wuthnow found that religion often makes us feel better about the behavior we have. It is often more therapeutic than prophetic.³⁸

Virtually all Americans—about three-fourths—see materialism as a social problem. Eighty-nine percent agree that “our society is much too materialistic.” Ninety percent say that “children today want too many material things.” Seventy-five percent say that “advertising is corrupting our basic values.” This makes us, as another survey suggested, “a society at odds with our values.”³⁹

We think that materialism is a social problem caused by individual choice, but not, interestingly, *our* personal choice. Wuthnow suggests that ironically “the American public voices concern about the reign of materialism while wandering the corridors of the mall. Somehow we have been able to convince ourselves that materialism is bad for our collective health,” but good for our individual well-being.⁴⁰

Americans believe that materialism is a social problem caused by individual selfishness. We worry about materialism because it seems to show a self-interest that devalues community and compassion. We do not generally understand materialism as a product of social forces (capitalism, laissez-faire economics, commercialism, business practices, profit-seeking, etc.) but as a matter of personal choice. This makes sense. We are individuals in an individualist culture, and our inability to think sociologically or structurally fits perfectly with standard American assumptions, which suggest that we’re only responsible for what we intend, and not for the institutions and organizations that we reproduce by our individual actions. We do not, therefore, think very carefully about creating a society or social institutions in which it might be easier to be good.⁴¹

Thus, Wuthnow finds that, although Americans who worry about materialism *are* less likely to value possessions themselves, the differences are quite small. And the materialist consensus is pretty broad, as we define for each other

the parameters of “the good life.” Eighty percent of us think that a job that pays a lot is important to the good life; 78 percent of us consider a beautiful home, a new car, and other nice things important; 75 percent of us value new clothes as part of the good life; 72 percent see travel for pleasure to interesting places as an important element of the good life. Restaurants are apparently not as essential: only 50 percent of us consider eating out at restaurants as important.⁴²

While 86 percent of American churchgoers think greed is a sin, 79 percent of them wish they had more money, and only 30 percent believe that “riches get in the way of knowing God.” “Apparently,” says Wuthnow, “the majority of American churchgoers have trouble believing Jesus really meant it when he talked about the difficulties the rich face in reaching the kingdom of God.” A 1995 survey for the Merck Family Foundation found that Americans are critical of their materialism, and willing to imagine changes. But they are much less likely to actually practice those changes.⁴³

How can we explain these apparent inconsistencies?

One strategy for resolving these conflicts is compartmentalization, saying that “money is one thing, morals and values are completely separate.” Like residential segregation, compartmentalization is a cultural strategy for keeping unpleasant facts and values out of mind. It is a form of cultural schizophrenia, which allows people to enjoy the so-called “good life” in a nation of structural injustice.⁴⁴

A variation of this first strategy is what Wuthnow calls “the psychologization of money,” in which our *attitude* toward money is emphasized more than our *behavior*. I can have all these things, we seem to say, as long as my values aren’t corrupted. Sometimes we invent what we call our “inner self,” an interior, real self that is uncontaminated by the commercial transactions our outer self engages in. We seem to say that we can have lots of stuff, so long as it doesn’t corrupt our inner self by invoking notions of greed and superiority. If we don’t *feel* greedy, then we probably aren’t. If we don’t derive our *essential* happiness from material possessions, it’s probably OK to have them. If our possessions don’t absolutely possess us, then we can justifiably possess them.⁴⁵

A second defense of materialism might be called the “I-don’t-spend-that-much” defense. Unlike the “it’s-all-subjective” explanation, which is essentially individual, this one is essentially social, invoking our relative virtue in a world of bigger sinners. I may not be a saint, we say pharisaically, but I’m not as bad as the really big spenders. This strategy might be called innocence by association, arguing that because everybody does it, it must be OK. It is essentially a quantitative approach to morality.⁴⁶

This makes sense sociologically, if not ethically. As Wuthnow points out, social norms define reasonable levels of consumption. “It is expected,” he says, “that people will consume automobiles, clothing, housing, and other items at a level consistent with their standing in the community.” When Phyllis Rose says that we shop “to be useful members of our class and society,” this is what she

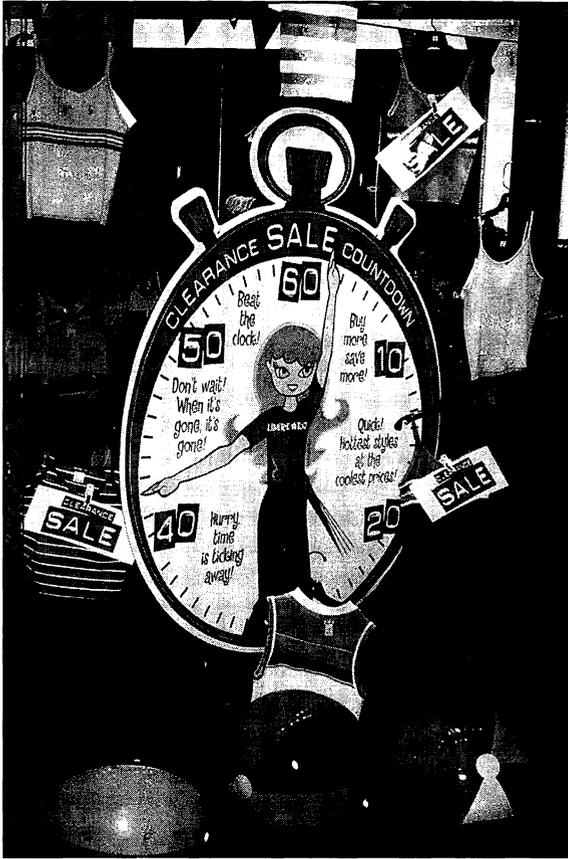


Figure 7: The sale—a way of selling materialism

means. In general, in America, most of us don't think we're living luxurious lives because residential segregation usually structures space so that we are among members of our own class. Compared to them, our consumption patterns are not abnormal, so we're not materialistic. Keeping up with the Joneses, therefore, keeps consumption levels high and social consciousness low.⁴⁷

Although Wuthnow doesn't mention it, I suspect that a variation of this "I-don't-spend-that-much" argument is my frequent choice, the "I-bought-it-on-sale" rationalization. In this defense, Americans like me implicitly compare their spending not with their neighbors, but with those people who presumably paid full price. *They* may be materialists; since I spent less, I must be merely wise. Such a strategy helps to explain both American materialism, and the "sales" that materialize in perpetuity in American stores.

A third rationale for materialism is what might be called the "I earned it" approach. Directly connected to the idea that the compensation for work is not just

a wage or a salary, but the private satisfactions that money can buy, this rationalization says basically that if you have the money (or if you have the credit), there's no reason not to buy what you want. "I can afford it," we say to ourselves, without ever asking if the society or the planet can also afford it. Indeed, environmentalists often complain that American consumers aren't materialistic enough, because we pay so little attention to the *materials* we waste in maintaining the American way of life. In a wonderful little book called *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*, John Ryan and Alan Durning show, for example, that while Americans generate about four pounds of garbage a day, it actually takes about 120 pounds of materials to support our average daily consumption patterns.⁴⁸

A fourth way that Americans justify their materialism is the "I-give-my-money-away" defense. Since Americans see materialism mainly as selfishness, any sort of generosity, however small, can convince us that we're not really materialistic. Donations to churches or charities—or the coin drop in the Salvation Army bucket—offer evidence that we care, and caring people, we assume, can't be materialistic. Giving becomes a justification for getting.⁴⁹

Armed with these justifications and rationalizations, tempted by ads and enticed by the comforts of the shopping center, Americans continue to manifest their materialism. While we see materialism as problematic, our opposition to materialism doesn't seem to materialize in institutions as robust as advertising and shopping centers.

Conclusion

Shopping is a form of perpetual motion. Because advertising works so well, it's true that shopping *can* cheer us up. The social and psychological states that are attached by advertisers to merchandise do adhere long enough to make us feel better about ourselves. And the novelty of the new purchase can give us a kind of pleasure.⁵⁰

But it's unusual for that pleasure to last. In many cases, the anticipation of acquisition is as pleasurable (or more so) than ownership itself. When we are planning a purchase, we need to convince ourselves to buy it, so we mainly pay attention to the positive attributes of the purchase. But after we buy the item—and the hopes and dreams that are associated with it—we often experience what is called "post-purchase dissonance," when we realize that we haven't really replaced the displaced meaning we were looking for. After buying Close-up toothpaste, I realize that it hasn't increased the intensity or scope of my intimate relationships. Even though I buy the right brand of beer, I realize that I'm not drawn into the rollicking social situations that I see in the ads.⁵¹

The new toy becomes old, and "as people adapt—as the novelty wears off—pleasure comes to be replaced by comfort"—or uneasiness. And so we go looking for pleasure again. Having moved from "feeling good to feeling nothing in particular," we want the good feeling that the goods can give again. When we are

buying things, we seldom realize that we are buying a whole cycle of social and psychological responses, and that the cycle almost invariably cycles back to shopping. For most consumers, the only cure seems to be death. Given the ideas and institutions of American life, it is lamentably all too likely that most Americans will, in fact, “shop ‘til they drop.”⁵²

Notes

1. For a good introduction to these issues, see *The Shopping Experience*, ed. Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell (London: Sage, 1997). For a classic essay on shopping and shopping culture, see Randall Jarrell, “A Sad Heart at the Supermarket,” in *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 64-89.

2. American Studies has a history of political and cultural relevance and engagement that’s threatened, I think, by the increasing abstraction and abstruseness of its researches. See James J. Farrell, “Some Elementary Questions for an American Cultural Studies,” *American Studies* 38 (Summer 1997): 41-47. For one good example of politically engaged scholarship, see Mark Hulsether, “Evolving Approaches to U.S. Culture in the American Studies Movement: Consensus, Pluralism, and Contestation for Cultural Hegemony,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 23 (Winter 1993): 1-55. See also Jay Mechling “Some [New] Elementary Axioms for an American Cultur[al] Studies,” *American Studies* 38 (Summer 1997): 23-27. I especially appreciate Jay’s pedagogical axioms, and his call for plain speaking.

3. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 107; Patty Pryor-Nolan, “Hot Topics,” *Star Tribune* (15 September 1994) (from an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*).

4. Recent articles show, however, that “the time bind” caused by increased worktime is eating into shopping time. Gretchen Morgenson, “The Fall of the Mall,” *Forbes* (24 May 1993): 106-12; Berna Miller, “Mall Shoppers with a Mission,” *American Demographics* (February 1997); Kathryn Hopper, “Shopping Sprees Lose Appeal as Women Juggle Job, Family,” Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service, (13 November 1997).

5. Jon Goss, “The Magic of the Mall: An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 1 (1993): 18-47. Goss’s essay is the best yet on malls.

6. On the functions of advertising in late 20th-century capitalism, see, among many others, Michael Schudson, *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, & Images of Well-Being* (Toronto: Methuen, 1986); Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Routledge, 1987); Robert Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

7. Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976). For a beautifully nuanced interpretation of advertising in the Twenties and Thirties, see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

8. Jib Fowles, “Advertising’s Fifteen Basic Appeals,” in *Common Culture: Reading and Writing About American Popular Culture*, ed. Michael F. Petracca and Madeleine Sorapure (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995), pp. 58-76. Further research is vitally needed on the words “need” and “enough”—it’s arguable that they are obsolete.

9. Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). Robert D. Holsworth and J. Harry Wray ask us to imagine how our lives would be different if all the ads we saw daily promoted communitarian public service, instead of the relentless individualism and privatism of contemporary ads. Holsworth and Wray, *American Politics and Everyday Life*, 2nd Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 41-49.

10. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 62. “Goods,” they say, “. . . are ritual adjuncts; consumption is a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events.” Douglas and Isherwood, *World of Goods*, 65.

11. Jerry Jacobs, *The Search for Acceptance: Consumerism, Sexuality and Self Among American Women* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 1988), pp. 23-24. A popular T-shirt pronounced this philosophy: “It is not who you are, but what you wear. Besides, who really cares who you are anyway?” See also Lauren Langman, “Neon Cages: Shopping for Subjectivity,” in *Lifestyle*

Shopping: The Subject of Consumption (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 40-82. On the subject of "cool," see both Malcolm Gladwell, "The Coolhunt," *New Yorker* 73 (17 March 1997): 78-88; and Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

12. On commodities as communication, see Douglas and Isherwood, *The World of Goods*; Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); and Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996). On the rhetoric of clothes, see Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Random House, 1981); and Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 57-70.

13. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, pp. 104-17.

14. Goss, "The Magic of the Mall," pp. 20-21. By evading the real world, of course, we shape the real world.

15. For more on the nostalgic qualities of consumption, see Jon Goss, "Once-Upon-a-Time in the Commodity World: An Unofficial Guide to Mall of America," (Unpublished ms., 1997).

16. Goss, "The Magic of the Mall," p. 21. As "Dr. America," I have also engaged these themes in radio broadcasts on the "Sport-Utility Vehicle," and "Isuzu Rodeo."

17. On models as models, see Jane Caputi with Susan Nance, "One Size Does Not Fit All: Being Beautiful, Thin and Female in America," in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Laue (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1992); Elaine A. Saltzberg and Joan C. Chrisler, "Beauty Is the Beast: Psychological Effects of the Pursuit of the Perfect Female Body," in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, 5th edition (Mountain View, CA, 1995), 306-15.

18. On advertising as a model of the good life, see Marchand, *Advertising the American Way*; Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: Knopf, 1986); and Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), pp. 79-83. On keeping up with (or ahead of) the Joneses, see Schor, *Overspent American*, pp. 8-9, 90-98. As one man said, "The Joneses is killing me." The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance: Views of Americans on Consumption, Materialism, and the Environment* (Washington, 1995), p. 15.

19. Goss, "The Magic of the Mall," p. 20. William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), p. 256-57, 338-39. See also John Ryan and Alan Durning, *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things* (Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch, 1997).

20. David Orr, *Ecological Literacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 5-6, 64-67; 160-61; Orr "Prices and the Life Exchanged," in *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington: Island Press, 1994), pp. 172-184; Richard North, *The Real Cost* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1986). On the real costs of cars, for example, see Alan Durning, *The Car and the City* (Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch, 1996), pp. 48-62.

21. *Adbusters* calls itself a "journal of the mental environment and promotes a practice called 'culture jamming.'" In addition to the magazine, see *Adbusters' Culture Jammers Toolbox* <http://www.adbusters.org/Toolbox/index.html>. See also Mark Dery, *Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs* (Westfield, NJ: Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, n.d.), also available at <http://www2.sva.readings/Culture-Jamming.html>.

22. Judith Williamson, *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 1986), pp. 229-33.

23. John Fiske, "Commodities and Culture," in *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin-Hyman, 1989), pp. 23-47. See also Robert Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially*.

24. International Council of Shopping Centers, "Frequently Asked Questions about the Shopping Center Industry," <<http://www.icsc.org/sctadv/misc/96-06-09.html>>; "When It's Time to Shop, Consumers Prefer Shopping Centers," *New York Times Magazine* (April 6, 1997): 32; Alan Durning, *How Much Is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), p. 130; Goss, "The Magic of the Mall," pp. 18-19. For an excellent survey of shopping center design, see Peter Gibian, "The Art of Being Off-Center: Shopping Center Spaces and Spectacles," in *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, ed. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon (Boston, Bedford Books, 1994), pp. 32-45.

25. ICSC, "Frequently Asked Questions," p. 1. Northwest Airlines offers special airfares for outlanders wanting to fly to Minneapolis to shop at the Mall. For more on the Mall, see Eric Nelson, *Mall of America: Reflections of a Virtual Community* (Lakeville, MN: Galde Press, 1998) and the Mall's website at <<http://www.mallofamerica.com>>. See also the website constructed by the students in my class on "Mall of America: America of the Mall" at <http://www.stolaf.edu/people/farrellj/MALL/am-studies-301.html>.

26. Margaret Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), p. 14; Victor Gruen and Larry Smith, *Shopping Towns U.S.A.: The Planning of Shopping Centers* (New York: Reinhold, 1960). Many of the features of shopping centers derive from the

attractions of department stores. See, for example, William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

27. James Atlas, "Beyond Demographics: How Madison Avenue Knows Who You Are and What You Want," *Atlantic Monthly* (October 1984): 49-58; Leon G. Schiffman and Leslie Lazar Kanuk, *Consumer Behavior*, 5th ed., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1994), pp. 47-89. See also the Stanford Research Institute's VALS website at <http://www.future.sri.com>.

28. Barry Maitland, *Shopping Malls: Planning and Design* (New York: Nichols, 1985), pp. 9-10.

29. Jon Goss, "Disquiet on the Waterfront: Reflections on Nostalgia and Utopia in the Urban Archetypes of Festival Marketplaces," *Urban Geography* 17 (April-May 1996): 221-47; Goss, "Magic of the Mall," pp. 22-25.

30. Jennifer Price, "Looking for Nature at the Mall: A Field Guide to the Nature Company," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), pp. 186-203.

31. Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," p. 10. It's no coincidence that Southdale's average shopper is a woman, because shopping is a thoroughly gendered pastime. In a 1987 survey, 93 percent of teenage girls listed shopping as their favorite activity. And this gender typing lasts beyond the teenage years: about sixty-seven percent of shopping center users are female. Durning, *How Much Is Enough?*, pp. 131-32; Goss, "Magic of the Mall," p. 19. For more on gender and shopping, see Rosalind Coward, *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought and Packaged* (New York: Grove Press, 1985); and Colin Campbell, "Shopping Pleasure and Sex War," in *The Shopping Experience*, pp. 166-76; and Paul Hewer and Colin Campbell, "Appendix: Research on Shopping—A Brief History and Selected Literature," in the same volume.

32. Goss, "Magic of the Mall," p. 24.

33. For more on the entertainment aspects of contemporary malls, see Jacquelyn Bivins, "Fun and Mall Games," *Stores* (August 1989): 39-41; Leslie Kaufman, "That's Entertainment," *Newsweek* (11 September 1995): 72; Gary Belsky, "Watch Out, Disneyland," *Money* (October 1992): 213-222; and Jane A. Black, "Shoppers Just Wanna Have Fun," *Monitor* (October 1989): 30-35. These entertainment functions are not new to retailing. See William Leach, *Land of Desire*, pp. 323-48; and Tracy C. Davis, "Theatrical Antecedents of the Mall That Ate Downtown," *Journal of Popular Culture* 24 (1991): 1-15.

34. Martha Wolfenstein, "The Emergence of Fun Morality," in *The Nacirema: Readings on American Culture*, ed. James P. Spradley and Michael A. Rynkiewicz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), pp. 394-402. See also "Study: Many Americans Shop for Fun," *HFD: The Weekly Home Furnishings Newspaper* 68 (14 November 1994): 12; and Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit: The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

35. Following Walter Benjamin, many people have focused on the flaneury of shopping centers. Again, this is a tradition that dates back at least to eighteenth-century arcades.

36. Eric Wiewfering, "What Has the Mall of America Done to Minneapolis?" *American Demographics* (February 1994): 13; Sally Apgar, "Megamall Snares Growing Base of Regular Shoppers," *Star Tribune* (19 December 1993): 1A.

37. Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 3. On the other hand, for an excellent critique of the critics of consumption (including me), see Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism," *The American Prospect* 5 (Spring 1991): 26-35.

38. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, pp. 72-77, 150. See also Rodney Clapp, ed., *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture* (Downer's Grove, IL, 1998).

39. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, p. 155; The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance*, 3-6.

40. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, pp. 155. For a slightly different view, see The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance*, 3-6.

41. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, pp. 178-79. The idea of creating institutions in which it would be easier to be good was Catholic Worker Peter Maurin's, and was an essential element of Sixties thinking. See James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: Making Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

42. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, p. 181. See also The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance*, pp. 3-4.

43. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, pp. 126, 130. The Merck survey did find, however, some evidence of "downshifting"—people making changes in their lives to make less money. The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance*, pp. 18-19. See also Juliet B. Schor, "Why (and How) More People Are Dropping Out of the Rat Race," *Working Woman* 20 (August 1995): 14; and Schor, *The Overspent Consumer: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

44. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, pp. 128, 150.

45. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, pp. 164-66.

46. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, pp. 182-83.

47. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, p. 33; Phyllis Rose, "Shopping and Other Spiritual Adventures in America Today," in *Common Culture*, pp. 621-24. Rose's elegant essay is one of the best descriptions published on the substantial pleasures of shopping.

48. On the social and ecological impacts of materialism, see Alan Durning, *How Much Is Enough?*; John Ryan and Alan Durning, *Stuff*; and Paul L. Wachtel, *The Poverty of Affluence: A Psychological Portrait of the American Way of Life* (New York: Free Press, 1983). For American attitudes on consumption and the environment, see The Harwood Group, *Yearning for Balance*, pp. 7-11.

49. Wuthnow, *God and Mammon*, p. 182.

50. For more on the pleasures of shopping, see John Fiske, "Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power and Resistance," in *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 13-42.

51. McCracken, *Culture & Consumption*, p. 116.

52. Barry Schwartz, *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), p. 155. In *The Overspent American*, Juliet Schor offers ample evidence of "downshifting"—Americans moving away from the consumption cycle—as well as nine principles for learning—and living—a genuinely good life.